97-84028-12

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The earthquake, the fire, the relief, July 28, 1906

[San Francisco?]

1906

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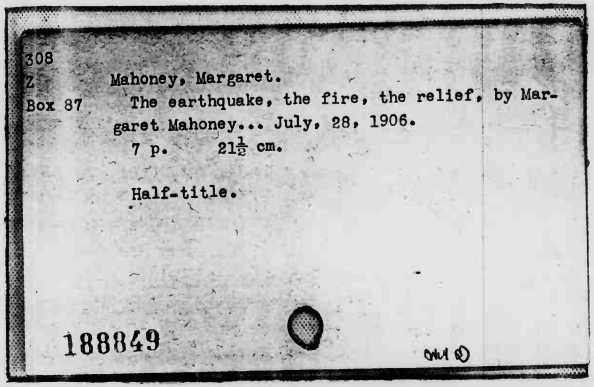

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The Earthquake, The Fire, The Relief.

By

MARGARET MAHONEY, M. D.

July 28, 1906

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Gift of K Mahoney
9/17/20.

The Earthquake, the Fire, the Relief.

THE evening of April 17th saw us, two women physicians, enjoying ourselves in a quiet way in the ordinary course of events. At seven P. M. we had attended the church wedding that made two members of the profession one, and later we took dinner together. After that we returned to our uptown flat and having hurriedly put on working day dresses started out to spend the night at the small medical center we were establishing in the southern section of the city. I did not take time to change my shoes and so wore light ties with high French heels, a point that told against me in the next day's walk. It was necessary that myself and Dr. Louisa Linscott spend the night at 929½ Howard St., as our caretaker had been dismissed and the establishment, if a small six-roomed house were entitled to such a term, could not be left without some one to answer the calls. There is no impression in my mind of what we did or said that evening, most likely we talked of the bride's dress, for my companion was soon to be a bride herself.

Thus closed the day and I slept undisturbed until the great shock came. With the first movement I rose and stepped to the door. I could see into my companion's room across the small hallway. She was sitting on the side of her bed. I called to her to stand under th door frame, an old California precaution in time of earthquake. Then we stood facing each other while the house rocked and strained and after a tremendous wrench, that seemed as if it would tear it asunder, rested for a second, settled back and then shook again in the opposite direction.

It was over. The only words were spoken by myself at the height of the shock when I remarked, "This must be doing great damage." I looked from the window and could see only a cloud of dust. We dressed and started out from the house, fearing that there might be many injured to need our aid. The early light of dawn was not natural. There was something sinister in the peculiar yellow tinge that filled the atmosphere. The hush was ominous. We started towards Fifth St.; asked a woman what has happened and were told "The Brunswick house is down." We returned

12 Oct 1920 Smd

to our house, the damage to which was nothing, and procured bandages. They were never needed. The injured there were not rescued, and in passing I must remark that after all was over it was marvelous how few were seen on the streets with bandages. Most of those who escaped with their lives were uninjured. Soon we reached the scene of one of the earliest disasters of the day. The large frame building at the corner of Sixth and Howard Sts. was down, a heap of wreckage, only the asphalt roof visible in undulations. Some few people were crawling out from under the mass of debris. Volunteers were working like Trojans to liberate those imprisoned. The men of south of Market St. and the two policemen were simply heroes. One slender youth, it is too bad his name is not of record, tried to do the work of a hundred men. There was no thought of self, their own lives were nothing to them.

Soon a new horror was added. A cloud—a smoke—a blaze, the mass was afire. Still the rescuers worked on. Some held up blankets and comfortables to protect the workers from the heat. I think they succeeded in rescuing two. Soon the heap of wreckage was a mass of flame. One woman tried to go back; her husband was there; she wished to die with him. God only knows how many perished. There must have been several hundred incinerated; many of them poor girls, outcasts for whom none will ever make inquiry.

We were obliged to move on up Sixth St. An auto with emergency surgeons arrived. Dr. Thomas in charge, asked me if there were people in the blazing mass. I answered in the affirmative. He said, "We will go in and get them." I replied, "It is useless, nothing can be done." The doctor hurried on, not trusting my information. In a few minutes he returned saying, "You were right. It is hopeless." We stood still longer and watched, saw the flames leap across the street and ignite the opposite buildings, and then started uptown, as there was nothing for us to do. The exodus had begun. The sound of rolling trunks was already heard. We met a university acquaintance, and so little did we appreciate the source and danger of the fire that although we knew live wires were tangled in every direction, still with him we breakfasted in a restaurant on Market St., where they served hot coffee and where the electric lights were still burning.

We walked up Golden Gate Ave. The City Hall was in ruins, houses down, wreckage everywhere, and in silence

we passed the silent people on the streets of the stricken city.

We reached our own dismantled flat, but remained only long enough to give the housekeeper leave to go and to secure some little coin; then went on to my old home where I was born. The family was there already. The old place had suffered little, only a few bricks from the chimneys were down.

My next care was to go to the Lane Hospital, where I had a paralyzed patient. She was safe. On we journeyed to St. Joseph's Hospital, nearly two miles off up the Park Hill, to inquire for an inmate. From the hillside we could see the fires burning in many places. We watched for a while and then tramped back into the city. At the Pavilion, which had been turned into an emergency hospital, we stopped to offer our services. As we entered a dead body was carried out in a wicker basket coffin. Within all was perfect order; the wounds of the injured bandaged; coffee being served, every attention given. The Sisters of the Holy Family added their gentle help. A stir and a move; it was whispered, "The place is afire, we must get them out at once." First ward ambulances were used, but that was too slow. Four men took each mattress and carried the sufferers out. They were put into autos and every manner of vehicle and taken to the Park Emergency and Presidio General Hospitals. In less than one hour they were all out. Mrs. Fry, of the Salvation Army, in charge under Dr. Ward, president of the health board, every single patient having been removed from the building, asked me to watch the supply wagons until they received official orders to move. That duty done I and my companion started for home again. We reached Pacific avenue and found all the neighbors as well as my relatives camped on the lawn. From the lower section of the town the mass of people were already moving westward. All that day and all that night they passed, the inhabitants of a cosmopolitan city; French, Spanish, Italians, the dark children of African origin; Oriental, Chinese and Japanese. They came pushing trunks, wheeling baby carriages full of household goods, carrying babies, carrying canaries in cages, carrying parrots; pushing sewing machines and trunks until the sickening sound of grating on the concrete entered so deep into my brain that I think it will never leave it. We lived on the lawn for the next twenty-four hours. Once through the night we went to the hilltops to look at the

burning city—a firey furnace, hell fire. No work can describe it. Towards morning there was a little local excitement. The gas main in a nearby street was exploding. Danger was close, but we did not move on. Our turn was to come later. It is strange that we coolly calculated the rate at which the fire was traveling and stranger still that it arrived at every given locality on time. As morning advanced part of the human tide turned eastward again. The ferries were running. They could reach Oakland on the other side of the bay. Dr. Linscott, who had been with me, left for her home in Berkeley. Soon the word was given; we must start. With our blankets on our backs and what provisions we could carry we moved westward to the Presidio Golf Links, leaving all our most cherished worldly possessions to be burned. On the way we met our friends and connections all trudging out to the same destination. I stopped again at Lane Hospital. The bustle of the move was there. The fire threatened. The sound of the nurses trunks could be heard as they dragged them down the concrete walks. They were sending the sick to the Presidio General Hospital. Two hours I remained with my patient until an ambulance came for her. Then strapping my blankets on my back again and taking a bag containing the most necessary articles of a doctor's kit, I walked out over the hills. On the way I met an old-time friend. He asked for my uncle, a gentleman of advanced years. To my answer, "He is at the golf links," he simply gasped, "It is dreadful." On and on I went. At the Presidio entrance I was met and taken in a buggy to where the family was located. We pitched our camp, the government supplied the tent. The struggle was over and that night disturbed only by the oft-repeated sound of dynamiting, I slept in peace, wrapped in my blanket, with no bed save the ground. While my all was burning I rested in peace on the golf links.

The morning awakening was to a scene of beauty; the view of the ocean between the bluffs, the little lake nestled just below the Marine Hospital, the reservation carpeted with the flowers of Spring, a blue sky and a fair day. We had no need for anxiety. The Government was taking care of us, and here I must remark that the first aid sent to San Francisco in her hour of need was prompt and efficient.

Now comes the saddest chapter in the history of our disaster. As I said the aid under the army supervision was prompt, efficient, generous. Then came a change. Some

new agency was at work shaping the relief policy. Soon it was learned that Red Cross and organized charity workers had arrived. Dr. Devine of the New York Charity Organization and National Red Cross, Br. Mores and Miss Higgins of Boston Associated Charities, Mr. Bicknell of Chicago Charity Organization and others whose names I do not know, were with us. These trained workers of the organized charities of the United States joined with the local relief committee. Being in the habit of dealing with paupers they undertook to pauperize a self-respecting community. Hoard was the keynote of their system, hoard supplies, hoard money, humiliate and insult the people so as to drive them from the bread lines. The cry was raised that there was work for all—remember that at that time the insurance companies prevented debris being cleared in the burned district; that money was plentiful, remember that at that time those who did obtain work were paid not in cash but in paper and that the savings banks were not open for business. Over official signature of Army general and civil Mayor it was asserted that in a few weeks there would be famine in San Francisco. It was intimated that he who could, by hook or crook, provide provisions for his immediate necessities, even by so doing he spent his all, was no better than a thief if he took the food necessary to sustain the life of his less fortunate fellow citizen. Soon a supply of flour was on hand, sufficient to give bread for a year to the burned-out people. The story of the flour is told in a few words, To distribute it would interfere with the local market, and so it was bartered for much less than its value to San Francisco milling concerns. Mill men were on the relief committee and large money was secured to wholesale flour dealers by the transaction. With immense supplies of new clothing on hand, the orders were to distribute second-hand articles. For weeks many were without change of underwear, although the schoolhouse, used as a warehouse, was stocked full.

At the end of two months it occurs to Dr. Devine to supply additional mattresses. Nearly two months and a half after the disaster he announces that it will be necessary to spend money to floor tents. Three months have gone now and houses for the refugees are not yet commenced. And to add gratuitous insult to injury it is stated that people remain in the tents because they like that life and do not wish to pay rent. This when it is evident to the most casual

observer that San Francisco has no other shelter to offer to thousands of her inhabitants.

Had the care of the people and the distribution of supplies been the first thought of those who undertook the relief work certainly such matters would have received attention long ago. But the method was to conserve supplies. People in need of clothing were kept standing in line all day and when they at last reached the distribution point were often told that it was too late and that they could return next day; perhaps then to be sent away because they were recognized by some one in charge as having been seen in line before. It never semed to occur to those who undertook the function of distribution that it was their duty to get the goods to the people and to provide houses for them. They could have opened many stations where supplies could be easily served, or better still, each camp might have been outfitted. As the secretary of our local charity organization said to me, "Put them on their mettle. Make it hard for them." Who were the people to be so treated. Human beings who had been through a most dreadful calamity, so dreadful that their faces bear the stamp that is probably indelible. They are resigned, earnest, resolute, and these characteristics show in the features of all who lived through those deradful days.

Now there are two explanations to the situation; either the trained charity workers are not of big enough calliber for the work or as adjuncts of the merchant class, agents of capitalists, they are guarding the interests of the men who support them. Of course it is possible that Eastern workers could not understand the conditions. We had little to correspond to the sweat-shop, nothing to parallel the New York tenement house. The earthquake of April 18th brought disaster to a self-respecting, industrious, prosperous people; we were not a city of paupers and if the generous world sent aid to a band of chronic destitutes, we were not the people. The only way to obtain supplies was to fill out cards containing humiliating and impertinent questions. Investigation, elimination, statistics were the order of the day where food and clothing were needed.

Aid sent by medical societies of the country to physicians could not be obtained except at the cost of submitting to a humiliating inquisition concerning the private affairs of the recipient. So far had Red Cross methods penetrated.

It was even suggested by the National Red Cross representative that a municipal or Red Cross pawnshop be open, so

that the sufferers could raise money on the few articles of value they had saved from the fire, and this with $6,000,000 (six million dollars) in the relief fund!

Surely they guard the money well from the people to whom it was sent. What will they do with it? They do not see fit to take the public into their confidence. It took the trained charity worker to have at hand methods to prevent people from getting what belonged to them. The cry of fraud; the cry of famine; the hours of standing in line; the endless circuit from one relief station to another in search of the necessaries of life, which were often never obtained; all these were systematic means of conserving the supplies. Much was stolen on its way to distribution, if the rumors that will not down have any foundation. If the individuals of which a community is composed do not need money and supplies then the community does not need them and they should be returned to their donors. However, this is not true. The money is needed by the individuals. If it had not been for private aid many would be in great distress in this city well stocked with general relief supplies. As it is many are enduring unnecessary suffering and anxiety. Charity methods should not be applied to urgent relief distribution. There is a grave doubt in my mind whether there is any legal right to loan money to calamity sufferers who are thus made to borrow what was sent as a gift to them.

To sum up the situation in a few words: The earthquake came, we held our breath, we were powerless. The fire came, we walked out, leaving our homes and their contents and all our material resources to burn. We were not disheartened. We old Californians are the children of pioneer fathers and not afraid of hardship. Our crowning sorrow was the relief distribution. The whole world rose to the occasion. San Francisco was supplied with every necessity, with many luxuries. But a small part has reached the refugees, for whom the relief was sent. Red tape and system have prevented those who lost their all from receiving proper care.

May all other stricken communities be spared the combination of Red Cross, trained charity workers and a relief committee composed of wealthy men.

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